

'Woods' full of ambivalence

Out of the Woods. By Chris Offutt. Simon & Schuster. 192 pages. \$21.

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In his second short-story collection, "Out of the Woods," Chris Offutt takes up the fine old Southern literary tradition of ambivalence about home, echoing William Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe. Every story features Kentuckians regretting that they returned to Kentucky or regretting that they ever left.

Kentucky in this book is rural and full of ignorant, stoic hillbilly characters built on awful clichés. They only know asphalt by its reputation. Large vocabularies intimidate them.

The county won't buy a clock for the sheriff's office, so the deputy uses the shadows moving across the floor to tell when it's time to let the weekend drunks out of jail and go home for the day. Families from separate hills carry on brutal feuds that extend back into the mists of time.

Coming down off the hill, especially to travel west, so corrupts characters that they aren't fit to return home.

Most of the stories feature young men who have drifted west to sporadic employment, nursing the wounds of failed relationships. Those who never leave are fueled by a mixture of paranoia and self-reliant dignity.

Offutt does a good job of getting a certain glum mood going about the possibilities or wisdom of returning home. He doesn't seem to know the answer to the question himself, which is not necessarily a problem. The ambivalence in some of the stories is quite affecting.

The problem is, once you catch on that the theme of the stories is that ambivalence, they don't offer anything else. Near the end of the book, the characters are still repeating the same point: "Sometimes I wish I never left here. Other times I wish I never come back. The worst things are still here and the best things are gone like somebody dropped them in a sack. It ain't home, it's what home was."

Similar speeches are the epiphany of most of the stories.

This ambivalence is supposed to redeem characters that are disagreeable in various ways, being either brutes or losers in most cases. But this explanation for their behavior isn't satisfying

for long.

Most of the stories are well told, terse and focused, but a few are clumsy as they strive for loftiness.

Offutt also too often violates the rule against telling rather than showing.

For example, "Target Practice," like many of the stories, tries to surprise the reader with unexpected sentimentalism. In this case, we learn after a son shoots his father that he really truly loves him, deep down. But the contrast is too great to be credible. The story says the son loves his father, but saying things isn't storytelling.

Ultimately, it's a lack of all the necessary parts of a story that fails "Out of the Woods." It has setting, characters and a subject matter, all of which have a lot of potential.

But Offutt could use a lesson from the famous writing teacher Janet Burroway who says that the crucial question for theme in a story is "What about what it's about?" Finally, these stories don't say anything about the ambivalence toward home that they are about.

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